DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 166 PS 015 826

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TITLE Comprehending Psychological Defenses: Developmental Differences between Normal and Disturbed Children and Adolescents.
PUB DATE May 86
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Symposium of the Jean Piaget Society (16th, Philadelphia, PA, May 29-31, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Behavior Disorders; *Children; Comparative Analysis; *Comprehension; *Developmental Stages; Piagetian Theory
IDENTIFIERS *Defense Mechanisms; Developmental Patterns; *Normal Children

ABSTRACT

Investigated were similarities and differences in the ability of 26 normally developing and 26 conduct-disordered children and adolescents to comprehend psychologically defensive behavior and the cognitive processes underlying differences due to age. Matched by cognitive level, subjects viewed vignettes depicting another child behaving defensively. Their answers to standard questions were evaluated against Chandler and his colleagues' Piagetian logical/structural analysis of eight defense mechanisms in three categories of increasing logical complexity: inversion (repression and denial); reciprocity (rationalization, displacement, turning against the self, reaction formation); and negations of joint propositional statements (projection and introjection). It was hypothesized that (1) if logical/analytical reasoning is the necessary prerequisite for comprehending irrational/defensive behavior, then normal and disturbed youngsters matched for logical/analytical ability ought to perform equivalently and (2) the ability to comprehend psychological defenses of increasing logical complexity ought to be systematically related to cognitive stage level for both normal and disturbed subjects. Contrary to Chandler and colleagues (1978), results indicated that although both normally developing and disturbed formal operational subjects found reciprocals easiest, the disturbed found negations of joint propositions easier than inversions, and the normally developing found inversions easier than negations of joint propositions. Implications are discussed. Two pages of references conclude the document. (RH)

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Comprehending Psychological Defenses: Developmental Differences Between Normal and Disturbed Children and Adolescents

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RUNNING HEAD: Psychological Defenses

Comprehending Psychological Defenses: Developmental Differences Between Normal and Disturbed Children and Adolescents

Do normal children and adolescents comprehend psychologically defensive behavior differently than comparably aged emotionally disturbed children and adolescents? What cognitive processes underly age-related differences in comprehending defensiveness? These two questions guided our present research.

Over the past several years, a limited group of researchers have examined children and adolescent's comprehension of psychologically defensive behavior (e.g., Chandler, Paget, & Koch, 1978; Dollinger, Staley & McGuire, 1981; Koch, Chandler, Harder & Paget, 1982; Whitman, 1967). The bulk of this research has been largely descriptive and has supported the anticipated age-comprehension relationship--older children consistently perform better than younger children in comprehending defense mechanisms. While these early studies revealed age related patterns in comprehending defensive behavior, theoretical explanations for these age differences were lacking.

In 1978, Michael Chandler and his colleagues presented a Piagetian logical/structural analysis of eight different defense mechanisms, grouped into three categories

of logical complexity (those requiring the cognitive operations of inversion--repression and denial; reciprocity--rationalization, displacement, turning against the self, and reaction formation; and finally, negations of joint propositional statements--projection and introjection) in an effort to account theoretically for age-related differnces. Within this classification scheme Chandler, et al., (1978) argued that these three classes of defenses were hierarchically ordered with inversions being less difficult than either reciprocals or negations of joint propositions, and with negations of joint propositions being the most difficult. In their study, children between the ages of five and twelve were required to explain the behavior of children who in eight different vignettes acted in a defensive way in order to avoid anxiety. Pre-operational children were found to be unable to comprehend any of the defenses. Concrete-operational children were successful with the defenses involving the cognitive operations of inversion and reciprocity and less successful with defenses involving negations of joint propositions. Formal-operational children were successful with all the defenses. Thus, logical/analytical ability was related to the comprehension of various levels of defense complexity.

Unfortunately, the research on comprehending psychological defense mechanisms has been conducted exclusively with normal individuals. Virtually nothing is

known about emotionally disturbed children's abilities to comprehend defensive behavior. There would seem to be many potential theoretical and practical implications for pursuing research with disturbed samples. Our immediate research goal, therefore, was to examine whether normal children and adolescents differed in any way from their disturbed counterparts in their ability to comprehend psychologically defensive behavior. Furthermore, we sought to re-examine the role of logical/analytical reasoning in this particular realm of social cognitive functioning.

We hypothesized that if logical/analytical reasoning is the necessary pre-requisite for comprehending irrational/defensive behavior, then (1) normal and disturbed youngsters matched for logical/analytical ability ought to perform equivalently and, (2) the ability to comprehend psychological defenses of increasing logical complexity (i.e., inversions, reciprocals, and negations of joint propositions respectively) ought to be systematically related to cognitive stage level for <u>both</u> normal and disturbed participants.

The participants in our study consisted of 26 normal and 26 disturbed children and adolescents ranging in age from approximately 5 to 13 years of age in both groups. Normally functioning children were obtained from a local public school. The disturbed youngsters, who were diagnosed as having conduct disorders, were obtained from local residential and non-residential treatment

facilities.

Participants from both groups were initially matched according to Piagetian cognitive level by evaluating their performance on two sets of cognitive measures which were individually administered. The measures used were: (1) Form C of the Goldschmid-Bentler Concept Assessment Kit-Conservation (Goldschmid and Bentler, 1978), and (2) a task involving combinatorial reasoning ability as a measure of formal operations (Elkind, 1968). Performance on these measures determined which Piagetian cognitive stage children were assigned to, i.e., either the pre-operational, concrete operational or formal operational stage.

Immediately following the initial cognitive assessment procedure, children were randomly presented a series of brief vignettes depicting another child acting in an irrational/defensive manner. Each participant was individually asked several standard questions following each vignette in order to determine his/her comprehension of the defensive behavior in question.

Our findings indicated that normal and disturbed children who were matched for Piagetian cognitive level differed in their understanding of several classes of irrational/defensive behavior. Furthermore, the presumed logical/structural demands of the defenses used in this investigation were not systematically predictive of performance within either group of participants at any

cognitive level. Thus, the results of our research were inconsitent with Ćhandler's et al., (1978) hypothesis that logical/analytical reasoning alone underlies the comprehension of irrational/defensive behavior.

Our results showed that pre-operational children's performance on the defenses in both groups was, as expected, not influenced by defense complexity--they failed to comprehend any of the defenses. But, among disturbed and normal concrete-operational participants, defenses dealing with reciprocals were found to be easiest followed by inversions. And as predicted, negations of joint propositions were the most difficult for both groups. Among the formal operational groups a more complicated pattern emerged. Disturbed formal operational participants performed best on those defenses involving reciprocals, not quite as well on negations of joint propositions, and were least successful on defenses dealing with <u>inversions.</u> A significantly different pattern emerged with normal formal operational participants. Defenses involving reciprocals were again the easiest, but inversions were more difficult and negations of joint propositions the most difficult. Consistent with Chandler's, et al., (1978) findings, formal operational children in both groups performed the best while pre-operational children performed the worst, by comparison, on all levels of defense complexity. And, while performance differences emerged between normal and disturbed children, they emerged only for formal

operational participants--normals did better than disturbed participants.

Thus, although cognitive level appears to be clearly related to comprehending psychological defenses, the present study questions Chandler's et al, (1978) contention that defenses assumed to involve the cognitive operations of inversions, reciprocals and lnegations of joint propositions are associated with successively more complex logical/analytical reasoning demands. This is not to imply that logical/analytical ability is unimportant in comprehending irrational/defensive behaviors, but rather that other processes may contribute significantly to the comprehension of psychological defense mechanisms.

Specifically, likely processes might include socialization and the development of social-perspective taking ability (Selman, 1980) and/or the development of specific knowledge domains (Glaser, 1984). Differences in socialization experiences between normal and disturbed youngsters may influence substantially their general perception of their social environment and influence their comprehension of psychological defenses in particular. Atypical socialization, for instance, has been shown to be related to higher levels of egocentrism (Neale, 1966), lower levels of empathy (Straker & Jacobson, 1981) and to a developmental delay in social-perspective taking skills (Selman, 1976), Furthermore, this "developmental lag" among disturbed children appears to have implications for

subsequent interpersonal problems and in the development of various forms of psychological disturbance (e.g., Chandler, 1973; Neale, 1966; Selman, et al., 1977; Straker & Jacobson, 1981). A deficit among disturbed children in social-perspective taking ability may have important consequences for comprehending intrapsychic processes in others.

Alternatively, differences between normal and disturbed children's understanding of irrational/defensive behavior may be attributable to the differential development of specific knowledge domains (e.g., Glaser, 1984). Disturbed children, for example, who grow up in disturbed households may attain greater familiarity with specific forms of defensive behavior.

Our study calls attention to the importance of continued research with disturbed samples for both theoretical and pragmatic reasons. Also, future research directed toward normal and disturbed children's comprehension of irrational/defensive behavior might do well to focus on relevant developmental theories which explain the observed performance differences between normal and disturbed individuals. This avenue of research not only would provide a solid theoretical base for understanding the cognitive processes relevant for psychological defenses but, as well, would expand the knowledge base in developmental psychopathology. This knowledge may eventually prove to be essential in the

planning and execution of appropriate clinical intervention strategies with disturbed individuals.

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